

Pierce County Council cuts more from jail budget; nonunion workers to get raises

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The Pierce County Council on Tuesday finalized the 2014 budget that will cut the jail's spending, give employees their first cost-of-living adjustment in three years and raise a number of fees.

After approving more than a dozen amendments, the council unanimously moved the budget toward a final vote next Tuesday.

The council focused much of its scrutiny on the deficit-ridden jail. It approved cutting \$706,000 from the jail budget originally proposed by County Executive Pat McCarthy.

In September, shortly before McCarthy released her budget, Undersheriff Eileen Bisson said the Sheriff's Department expected jail contract revenue to drop next year by \$706,000 more than expected.

McCarthy later recommended adding the cut, and the council concurred to balance the corrections bureau's budget. McCarthy had already put \$2 million from increased property and sales tax dollars into her budget to offset the jail's deficit for next year. But that wasn't enough.

In light of the added corrections cut, Sheriff Paul Pastor said his department is examining options for added revenue — including jail contracts — and cost savings. Pastor wouldn't rule out additional layoffs of corrections deputies. But he noted: "We're going to look for every other possibility."

The council laid off 16 corrections deputies in September to help plug a deficit that reached \$5 million. The jail's revenue and population have plunged since January, when Tacoma shifted its misdemeanor bookings to Fife's jail for cheaper rates.

The council also approved paying the state auditor, or an outside firm, up to \$40,000 to audit the accounting practices of the Sheriff's Department — including the corrections bureau — with a focus on money spent on training and equipment. Corrections deputies complained during hearings on the layoffs that their training and equipment were inadequate.

"I welcome an audit," Pastor told the council. "I am happy to have everything looked at. That's the way we do business."

The council approved a key part of McCarthy's budget, giving cost-of-living adjustments to the county's nonrepresented employees for the first time in three years. Wages will increase 1.25 percent in January and 1.25 percent in June for an annualized increase of 1.88 percent. Union employees will get the same increase — also their first COLA in three years — according to their approved contracts.

The council raised the general fund budget for core government services from the \$270.1 million proposed by McCarthy to approximately \$270.6 million. The extra money goes to a number of expenses sprinkled throughout the budget.

Exact budget numbers were not available Tuesday night.

The council voted to increase several rates and fees:

- Sewer rates will go up in 2014 and 2015. The monthly rate for single-family residences will increase from \$41.86 in 2013 to \$42.82 in 2014 and \$44.18 in 2015. The 2015 rate includes 37 cents per month to offset the cost of starting a 20-percent discounted rate that year for low-income seniors and persons with disabilities.

The rate hikes for 2014-15 are the last in a series of increases dating back to 2010 for the \$353 million expansion of the county's Chambers Creek Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant in University Place.

- The annual surface water management fee, currently \$103.17 for residences, will go up to \$106.63.

- Ferry rates will increase 3 percent annually for 2014 and 2015 that runs from the town of Steilacoom to Ketron and Anderson islands.

- Park and school impact fees will increase for the first time since 2011. Rates were not raised in 2012 or 2013 because of the recession.

The council made several other additions to McCarthy's budget, including \$130,720 for a prosecuting attorney for elder fraud and abuse.

The council approved spending up to \$30,000 to study the feasibility of starting a mental health court within Pierce County District Court. But it narrowly rejected a proposal from three council members to double county funding for Safe Streets to develop its program for Parkland and Midland.

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Read more here: <http://www.thenewtribune.com/2013/11/13/2888472/county-cuts-more-from-jail-budget.html#storylink=cpy>